Opera's 'Lark Ellen' Built Her Nest in Covina

Madame Ellen Beach Yaw, Los Angeles' most celebrated opera diva, lent her stage name to a Covina freeway exit and, in gratitude, the city keeps the legacy of "Lark Ellen" alive.

Outside the east San Gabriel Valley city, whose historical society maintains a continuing exhibition of Yaw's memorabilia, the artist once praised as the "California Nightingale" and "California's Queen of Song" is seldom recalled.

But in her day, Yaw's beauty not only caught the eye of Los Angeles Times Publisher Gen. Harrison Gray Otis, her four-octave soprano voice got his ear. Together Otis and Yaw raised funds for the general's Newspaper Boys Home, an orphanage for paperboys in Sawtelle, now West Los Angeles. Later, he would change the orphanage's name in her honor, calling it the Lark Ellen Boys Home.

Bringing opera to an unrefined territory was her mission at a time when high culture was just beginning to emerge from the confines of local society ladies' parlors. Later, early settlers turned out in the hundreds for benefit performances at her Covina homes.

Paul Bertness Collection

Harrison Gray Otis and Yaw, whom he nicknamed "Lark Ellen," at opening of aqueduct.

Born in upstate New York in 1869, Yaw learned to sing as a child. Her first taste of inspirational music came in Sunday school, when a revivalist asked the children to sing the hymn "Jesus Loves Me." After listening to their voices, the preacher grabbed Yaw by the hand and led her to the platform, where he asked her to sing for the congregation.

Yaw was soon in demand around the countryside, singing at weddings, concerts and church socials.

Believing in her 14-year-old daughter's talent, her mother accompanied her on a series of whistle-stop tours across the nation, making sure her talented daughter did not accept kisses on or off the stage.

Lured by advertisements that said Yaw possessed the highest vocal range in history, curious audiences arrived at her concerts armed with pitch pipes and tuning forks.

In 1890, Yaw and her mother moved to Covina to be close to her sister, Anna Yaw Thorpe. During a brief teaching stint at Throop University, later renamed Caltech, and while working for the Postal Telegraph firm, she and her sister began entertaining fellow workers with concerts at their homes.

While touring Europe around the turn of the century, she studied under the bel canto teacher Mathilde Marchesi. About the same time, her remarkable voice inspired Sir Arthur Sullivan, the composer half of Gilbert & Sullivan, who created for her "The Rose of Persia," his last completed operetta.

She enlarged her repertory to roles in more than 15 operas, among them "Faust," "La Traviata" and "Don Giovanni," performing at Milan's La Scala opera house, where she was given a standing ovation.

In 1907, at 38, she secretly married cowboy railroad tracks. The Boston-born Goldthwaite, who was working at a nearby ranch, rode to the rescue.

After a honeymoon in Covina, where she entertained at summer concerts, Yaw toured the Orpheum Circuit, which had been set up by impresario L.E. Behymer, who went on to help found the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Her husband, meanwhile, took up professional public speaking.

In 1908, they returned to the East Coast, where she made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in "Lucia di Lammermoor." Although she created a sensation, receiving 29 curtain calls, she sang only one performance and turned down a three-year contract—partly because the offer was too low, partly to be with her husband.

"Opera is very hard work," she later told her record manager, "and I make more money in one concert than any opera company can pay me."

When her husband died four years later, she interred his ashes on her property, called "Lark Nest," near the corner of what is now San Bernardino Road and Lark Ellen Avenue. Topping the spot with a concrete slab, she inscribed her initials, "E.B.Y.G. 1912," along with her handprint. Later, when the street was widened, the crypt and slab became part of the sidewalk.

The next year, Otis introduced her at the dedication ceremony for the Los Angeles Aqueduct, during which she sang her song "California." His admiration was evident: "Woman of grace, culture and achievement; one who is a recognized queen in the Kingdom of Song. She has won wide fame not alone in her own country, America, but likewise honored name. She is of us Californians who are here today, and we proudly claim her as our own."

Four years later, in 1917, she sang at his funeral.

In 1913 she headed back East after receiving an invitation from inventor Thomas Edison, who wished to record her vocal range. Edison, who by that time was so hard of hearing that he had to clench his teeth on the frame of the piano in order to "hear," said afterward: "Can see no defects . . . best high tones yet for the disc machine. She has enormous range."

As a favor to the Hollywood Bowl's founders, Yaw tramped through the Daisy Dell hillsides, testing the acoustics, before settling down to semi-retirement in Covina.

After she married her pianist, Franklin Cannon, in 1920—a union that ended in divorce—she began tapping younger talent, including vaudeville's Duncan Sisters. Launching Rosetta and Vivian's career in 1923, before their fame in "Topsy and Eva," Yaw held a reception at Los Angeles' Orpheum Theater. While concentrating on a few of her proteges, she never stopped motivating and inspiring her other students and showcasing them in her garden.

Determined to bring culture to the San Gabriel Valley, she moved farther north in Covina, building a 350-seat private outdoor theater that she called "Echo Bowl" on Cameron Avenue. For almost 20 years, it was the site of Easter sunrise services and her own recitals, as well as those of her students.

By the time Yaw died in 1947, Covina had named a street, a school, a hospital, a retirement center and a railway station for